

Masonic Mountain

CA-010-102

MASONIC MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-010-102)

1. THE STUDY AREA ---

6,605 acres

The Masonic Mountain WSA is located in northeastern Mono County, approximately three miles east of Bridgeport, California. The WSA includes 6,493 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, 112 acres of private inholdings, and no State lands (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The northern boundary of the WSA commences at the edge of a material site right-of-way and goes east along a primitive vehicle route and Toiyabe National Forest (USFS) land until it reaches an improved ranching road just south of Masonic Mountain. The boundary turns south along the road and skirts around private land. The boundary then heads west on Rock Springs Canyon Road at Locomotive Point. The southern boundary continues west along Rock Springs Canyon Road and private land until it reaches a sanitary landfill where it turns north along State Highway 182. The boundary proceeds north along the highway around private land and a 60-KV transmission line right-of-way until it returns to the material site right-of-way.

The WSA occupies the northwestern portion of the Bodie Hills. The Bodie Hills lie along the western margin of the Basin and Range geomorphic province, adjacent to and slightly within, the eastern periphery of the Sierra Nevada geomorphic province. The unit is characterized by gentle to moderately rolling volcanic hills that slope toward Bridgeport Valley which lies to the south and west. Elevation ranges from 6,000 to 9,000 feet. Some interior drainages and canyons, most notably Rock Springs Canyon, dissect the unit and diversify the area's landforms. Rock outcrops in this canyon provide picturesque and striking contrasts within the immediate area. The WSA is uniformly blanketed with pinyon-juniper associations except for the eastern and southwestern portions. Understory species include Great Basin desert shrubs such as sagebrush and annual grasses.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Various suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) for the Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Two different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EIS: all wilderness and no wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE ---

0 acres recommended
for wilderness

6,493 BLM acres recommended
for non-wilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in this WSA is released for uses other than wilderness. The all-wilderness alternative is considered to be the environmentally-preferred alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The no-wilderness alternative will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

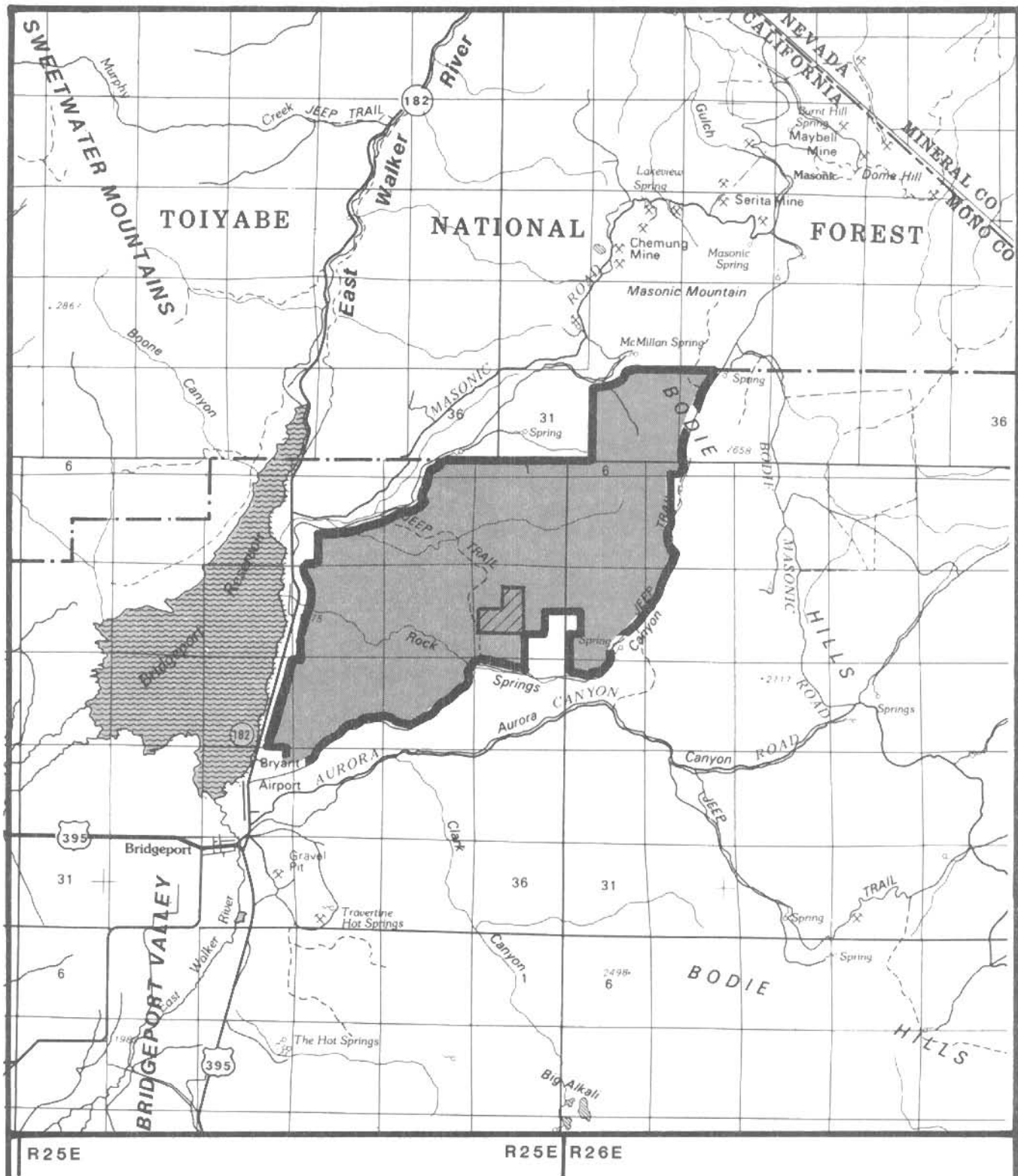
The WSA is recommended non-suitable because its potential for mineral occurrence, motorized recreation, and Native American Tribal Colony expansion needs outweigh the area's wilderness values. Within this WSA, wilderness values are considered low in quality due to the lack of significant wilderness features or characteristics unique to the region.

Resource conflicts in the WSA include moderate potential for metallic minerals in the WSA's northeastern portion, moderate potential for nonmetallic minerals in the western third of the WSA, and moderate to high potential for geothermal resources throughout the WSA. Geothermal lease applications are pending in the southwestern portion of the WSA.




The WSA sustains and provides some suitable opportunities for motorized recreational use. Approximately four miles of primitive vehicle routes are located in the WSA. These routes are used by local snowmobilers during winter months. Additionally, the Modesto Ridgerunners use these routes for their annual four-wheel drive poker rally sightseeing activity. It is expected that demand and use of this area for motorized recreational activities will continue.

The Bridgeport Indian Tribal Colony has expressed an interest and need for 120 acres of public land in the southwestern corner of the WSA. They have requested the land for long-term expansion needs related to residential and commercial development.

The WSA reflects an environment that contains wilderness values which are not considered significant or unique to the area. As a result, wilderness values are considered low and would provide little or no significant enhancement to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS).

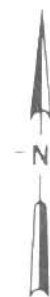


- | | |
|---|---|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |

- | | |
|---|--------------|
|  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | STATE |
|  | PRIVATE |

**Masonic Mountains
Proposal
MAP-1**

0 1 2 3
MILES



010-102
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,493
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		112
Total		6,605
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Study Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	6,493
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		6,493

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The WSA is considered to be very natural. It consists of rolling and rounded volcanic hills dissected by interior drainages. Rock Springs Canyon incises the southern portion of the unit up to a depth of 700 feet. Rocky outcrops in this canyon impart striking and sharp contrasts in the local area - particularly around Locomotive Point. A pinyon-juniper woodland with a big sagebrush, bitterbrush, and perennial grass understory covers most of the WSA. Treeless areas are dominated by big sagebrush and perennial grasses. Plant density is moderate.

There are a few man-made imprints which are substantially unnoticeable in the WSA as a whole. These include approximately four miles of primitive Jeep trails, a fenceline, and two spring developments. Excessive livestock utilization in some wetland

areas is causing site degradation. Man-made features are small relation to the unit's overall size, terrain, diversity, and vegetative screening.

2. Solitude: The unit provides outstanding opportunities for solitude and isolation. Topographic diversity and vegetative screening provided by the pinyon-juniper stands combine together to screen out man's influences, thus enhancing opportunities for seclusion. The Bridgeport community and State Highway 182 are located along the western side of the unit and slightly limit opportunities for solitude along the western edge of the WSA.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: The eastern portion of the WSA contains outstanding opportunities for sage grouse hunting—a very popular area during open season. In addition, the area provides outstanding opportunities for other primitive recreation experiences such as camping, hiking, horseback riding, etc. A few water sources are located in the WSA.
4. Special features: The WSA contains a few special features. The WSA supports two plant species that are candidates for the sensitive plant list (Phacelia monoensis and Eriogonum ampullaceum).

In addition, the WSA includes several wildlife species such as sage grouse, a recovering species of game birds that had been historically over-harvested, and mule deer which rely on this intact natural environment for their seasonal migrations. The WSA's understory, pinyon cover and rock outcrops also provide crucial fawning habitat for deer.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 6,493 acres of the Intermountain Sagebrush/Juniper Woodland ecosystem. The Masonic Mountain WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Juniper-Pinyon Woodland	4	81,301	74	2,144,810
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
Intermountain Sagebrush/ Juniper-Pinyon Woodland	3	61,701	18	359,340

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of nine major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3 - Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>California</u>				
Chico	16	1,286,873	13	430,822
Fresno	35	4,048,852	28	460,790
Merced	33	3,957,550	25	348,753
Modesto	36	4,126,963	81	1,722,326
Sacramento	46	5,001,817	87	2,479,541
Stockton	35	4,061,833	46	601,496
Vallejo-Napa-Fairfield	44	4,832,667	74	2,100,862
Yuba City	44	4,951,805	85	2,459,500
<u>Nevada</u>				
Reno	39	4,647,230	175	6,904,809

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas: The WSA is within 50 air miles of one BLM WSA recommended for wilderness designation. The Hoover Wilderness, 15 miles to the west, is the nearest designated wilderness area. This wilderness area is administered by the Toiyabe and the Inyo National Forests. Other nearby designated wilderness areas include Yosemite National Park which is managed by the National Park Service, the Ansel Adams

Wilderness which is managed by the Inyo National Forest, and the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness which is managed by the Toiyabe National Forest.

C. Manageability

The WSA is manageable as wilderness. The low brush and gentle terrain along the northeastern corner as well as some small areas near the western boundary make these portions of the unit susceptible to indiscriminate off-highway vehicle use. Some signing, patrolling, and fencing may be required at these locations. Indiscriminate off-highway vehicle use is considered to be low.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendation: The Masonic Mountain WSA is in the BLM Bodie Geology-Energy-Mineral (G-E-M) Resource Area (GRA). An overview of the mineral potential of the WSA is addressed in the Affected Environment section of the Wilderness Recommendations, Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Study Area EIS prepared in 1987. The EIS states that the WSA has a moderate resource potential for metallic minerals in the northeastern portion and a low resource potential for metallic minerals for the remainder of the area. The resource potential for non-metallics including sand and gravel is moderate in the western third and low for the remainder of the WSA. The resource potential for uranium is low. There is no resource potential for oil and gas. The geothermal resource potential is moderate for most of the WSA to high in the southwestern corner of the WSA ("Lands Prospectively Valuable for Geothermal Resources", unpublished USGS map, revised 1985).

The mineral information in the EIS is supported by the BLM Bodie G-E-M report. This report includes extensive references and personal communications with mining companies active in the area. The Masonic Mountain WSA encompassing 6,493 acres of public land is located on the southern edge of the Masonic mining district. The Bodie mining district is approximately eight miles southeast of the WSA. The general area is underlain by Tertiary lava flows, plugs, and pyroclastic deposits of principally dacitic composition. Production of gold and silver in the mining districts came from several systems of quartz veins. They are closely associated with hydrothermal alterations widespread in the mining districts. This hydrothermal alteration is common in the WSA. BLM records in 1983 identified 21 mining claims in the WSA and a few pending geothermal lease applications in the southwest corner of WSA.

2. Summary of significant new mineral resource data collected since the suitability recommendation which should be considered in the final recommendation: Because this WSA was recommended nonsuitable by BLM, no U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) nor U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) mineral surveys were conducted in this WSA. No new mineral data in the WSA has become available since the preparation of G-E-M report in 1983.

Re-examination of the BOM's Mineral Industry Location System (MILS) record (March 25, 1983) disclosed a mercury occurrence at NW1/4, NW1/4, section 22, T. 5 N., R. 25 E. within the WSA. This is the only mineral information in addition to the past mineral record described in the EIS. This mercury occurrence is not significant enough to alter the earlier EIS conclusions.

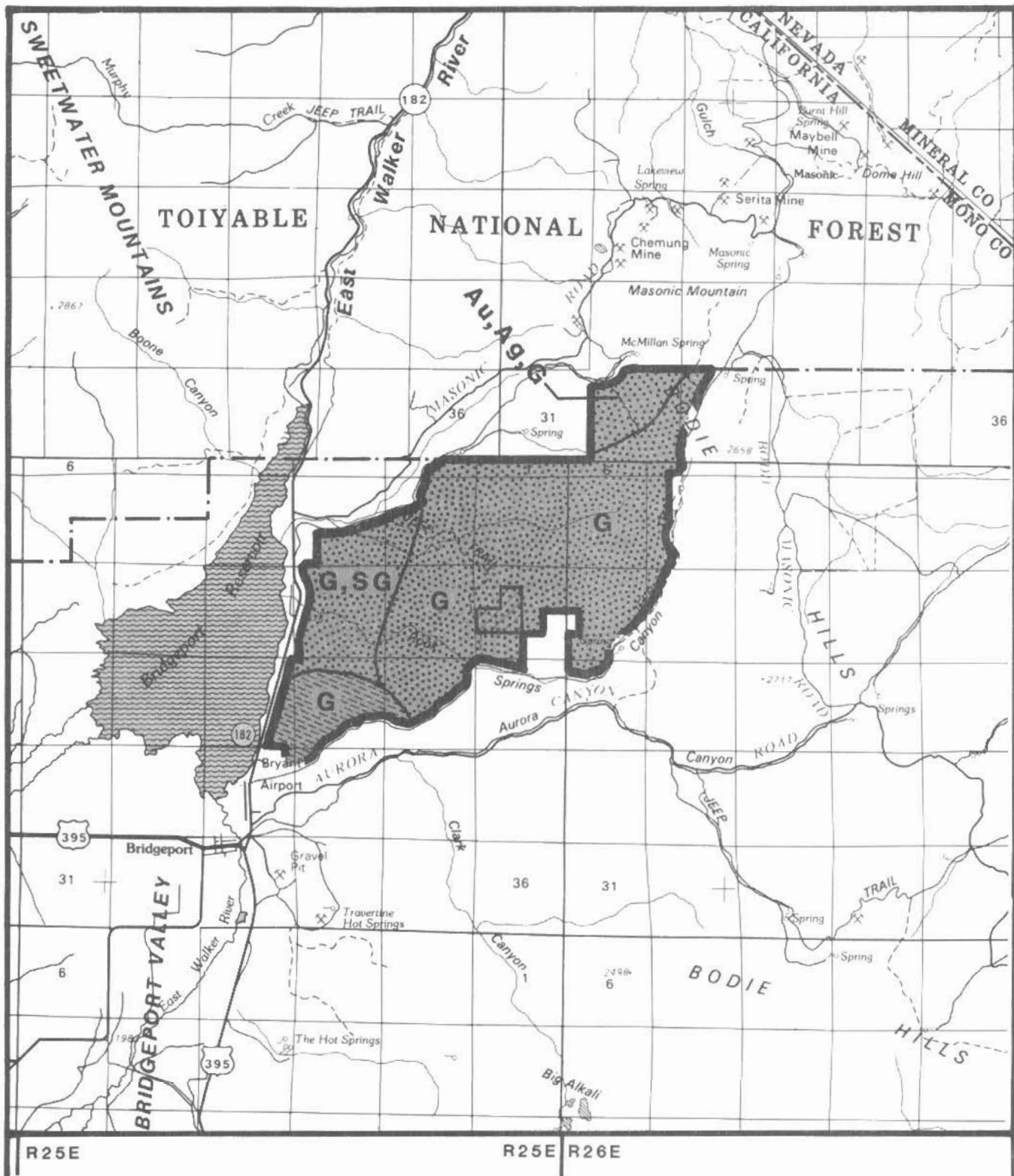
As of March, 1988, BLM records indicated that there are nine lode claims covering 180 acres in the nonsuitable portion of the WSA (Table 4). The areas of high and moderate geothermal potential cover 6,493 acres or 100% of the WSA.

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE	NO.			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Mining Claims						
Lode	0	9	9	0	180	180
Placer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mill Sites	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	9	9	0	180	180

E. Impacts on Resources

The following table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all alternatives considered including designation or non-designation of the entire area as wilderness. (For a full explanation of this summary, refer to the Benton-Owens Valley/Bodie-Coleville Wilderness - Final Environmental Impact Statement.)



T6N
T5N

T5N
T4N

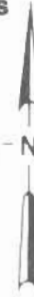
- NONE Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

Explanation

- High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
- Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
- High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

Commodity Symbols

- Ag** Silver
- Au** Gold
- G** Geothermal
- SG** Sand & Gravel



Masonic Mountains Mineral Resource Potential



Map-2
010-102

Table 5 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Wilderness Values	<p>On an overall basis there would be a minor impact to wilderness values throughout the 6,605-acre Masonic Mountains WSA. Localized impacts near the northwest and southwest boundaries from mining activity and geothermal development would result in a direct loss of naturalness on 180 acres and impair the perception of naturalness and solitude on a total of 1,000 acres. Future residential and commercial development for the Bridgeport Indian Colony on 120 acres of public land within the WSA would result in a direct loss of naturalness and adversely impact the perception of naturalness and solitude throughout the southwest portion. Continued motorized recreation use, fuelwood harvesting, pinyon nut collecting, and construction and maintenance of livestock facilities and wildlife projects would result in only negligible to minor local impacts. Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would be limited primarily along the boundary of the WSA in areas of mining</p>	<p>Wilderness designation of the entire 6,605 acres within the Masonic Mountain WSA would result in positive benefits to the wilderness values. Naturalness and solitude would be significantly retained locally by prohibiting mining activities that would affect 300 acres and geothermal development affecting 700 acres. Potential expansion of the Bridgeport Indian Colony within the WSA would be precluded retaining wilderness values within the surrounding 700 acres. Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would be retained throughout the WSA. Closure of the WSA to motorized recreation would result in a slight positive benefit to wilderness values. Special features including sensitive plants and crucial deer fawning habitat would be retained and slightly enhanced.</p>

Table 5 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative (Cont'd)

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO-WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL-WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Wilderness Values (continued)	activity, geothermal development, expansion of the Bridgeport Indian Colony, and continued vehicle use. Special features including sensitive plants and crucial deer fawning habitat would be retained.	
Motorized Recreation Use	There would be no impact on motorized recreation use in the WSA. The current 450 visitor use days per year are expected to remain stable.	The entire WSA would be closed eliminating 450 visitor-days per year of motorized recreation use. Only minor adverse impacts are anticipated due to the availability of opportunities outside the WSA and the accessibility of the WSA by foot.
Mineral Development	There would be no impact on mineral development. An open-pit gold mine and a sand and gravel operation are anticipated for development within the WSA.	Development of potential mineral resources within the WSA would be foregone. Known deposits of sand and gravel and projected deposits of disseminated gold would not be available for development.
Geothermal Development	There would be no impact on geothermal resource development. The entire WSA would be available for exploration and development including a projected 10-Mw low temperature resource.	Geothermal resource development would be prohibited. Development of a potential 10-Mw low temperature geothermal resource would be foregone. Over the long term, this would result in only a minor impact.
Potential Indian Colony Expansion	There would be no impact on potential expansion of the Bridgeport Indian Colony to meet their future needs.	Since public lands would not be available for potential expansion needs of the Bridgeport Indian Colony, there could be an adverse impact.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

During the inventory phase, a few comments were received addressing the WSA's geothermal potential, and existence of non-public lands.

After the inventory, comments were received during the wilderness study process. One comment was received which supported the area's supplemental values, and thus supported wilderness designations. Eight comments were received which noted the area's mineral specimens and requested the area remain open to rockhounding.

During the study phase, a public meeting and public hearing were held in association with the draft EIS. The public meeting was held in Markleeville, California, and the public hearing in Bishop, California. Comments were received orally through the hearing, and in writing during the 90-day public review period. A total of 83 written and oral comments were received. Forty-one comments supported the Bureau's no-wilderness recommendation. Forty-two comments supported the all-wilderness alternative.

No Federal, State or County agency comments were received specific to this WSA.